

Again, Federal Inmate Firefighters Go Missing!

BY: *Steven Francis Barrington III

Hundreds of federal inmate firefighters have once again gone missing. This past summer they went missing from California's various wildfires, and yes, they went missing during New Mexico's recent wildifires. To come up missing inmates used their same modus operandi they've used year after year. No, this grave and avoidable problem isn't new nor is it going away or even being addressed. So how do federal inmate firefighters habitually go missing? They go missing because there are no federal inmate firefighters! Does this shock you? This pathetic situation must be remedied now with bipartisan support because having federal inmate firefighters is one issue that's not open for debate.

The Justice Department, overseers of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, doesn't operate an inmate firefighting program. Whatever their excuse, and it's sure to be an abysmal excuse, it must be told to current and soon to be wildfire victims without invoking climate change, critical race theory, the war in Ukraine or Donald Trump as the excuse. Who will accept the responsibility to explain with a straight face the logic, is any, as to why thousands of innocuous firefighting capable inmates warehoused in low and minimum facilities are precluded from helping to fight wildfires. Wildfire victims who are burying family members; standing dazed and confused in their smoldering ruins; ululating over the loss of their property; harboring the pangs of their shattered lives while haggling with the good-hands people and completing disaster relief loan applications deserve a no-spin, no circle back, answer.

Take a look at California and their 2022 wildfires because it

again exposes the severe shortage of wildfire firefighters and the neglected status of combustibles accruing in our national forests. At least 60 percent of California's forests are under the control of the Federal government, but U.S. Forest Service firefighters are few, thereby rendering them heavily dependent on California's Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, known as Cal-Fire, who deploy all available firefighters from California Department of Corrections' inmate firefighting program. Cal-Fire also issues 911 calls for all available municipal firefighters within and beyond the state and accepts help from foreign based firefighters. Approximately 10 thousand firefighters battle the blazes but more are needed. Federal inmate firefighters would be a great help, if only they existed.

California Department of Corrections' inmate firefighters are nationally recognized for their firefighting tenacity. They consist of thousands of volunteering inmates from low and minimum security-risk levels. These inmates train year-round and are staged throughout the state for immediate deployment. Some have given their lives in fighting wildfires. They work hard for de-minimis pay, earn a well deserved day for a day good time credit sentence reduction, report a trivial rate of recidivism, and help reduce California's wildfire and incarceration costs. Vice President Harris can personally attest to this bona fide win-win-win from her time as California's Attorney General.

The California Department of Corrections and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have low and minimum security-risk levels that are strikingly similar. First, take a look at the Federal prison

population and its security-risk level stratification. Notice how the population magically hovers between 155 thousand and 158 thousand people month after month, year after year. Second, the Bureau's website reflects almost half are collectively classified as low and minimum security risk, determined through analytical analysis conducted by the Bureau's security-risk classification system located at their Grand Prairie, Texas, facility. Inmates with low and minimum security-risk classifications are warehoused at low and minimum (camp) facilities, respectively.

No, low facilities are not Prisneyland but they're accurately described and universally accepted as club fed. And with limited billets at camp facilities, which are cheaper to operate, local staff routinely augment or maintain an individual's security-risk classification higher than Grand Prairie's analysis. The costly collateral damage: Low facilities are over populated with tens of thousands of individuals with artificially escalated security-risk levels in order to warehouse them at low facilities. Furthermore, the small staff to inmate ratio is confirmation that individuals at low and minimum facilities are **overwhelmingly** minimum and no risk, respectively. Individuals who are actually non-violent and extremely remorseful, some highly educated with advanced degrees from reputable universities, many are completely medically needy, and yes, many are hopelessly gormless. Each have made a mistake in life or plead guilty to one. Each have been oversentenced because sentencing is a sport. Each have a release date, and if lucky a home to return to. But most are simply cast into the street, left to be a homeless product of the "justice system."

Regardless, until their release date thousands of them, but let's not be naive, not all, are ripe for training and then help fight wildfires or clearing combustibles in our national forests.

After enduring and reviewing club fed and camp operations, respectively, except for their gross deliberate indifference in delivering basic medical care, the Bureau gets a D minus. Both facilities are financial parasites on taxpayers, a severe drain on natural resources, loss of opportunity to serve America, and fail to deliver value for the dollar. Let's take a quick look.

FCI Lompoc Low is universally acknowledged as a club fed facility. This facility is located on Vandenberg Air Force Base, the home of Space Force and adjacent to nuclear missile silos and the Southern California coastal community of Lompoc, California. The low's perimeter chain-link barbed wire fencing serves more for theatrics and keeping the public out, and tennis balls, soccer balls, softballs, footballs, basketballs, PVC type golf balls and frisbees inside the facility. Club members dawdle away their day by recreating like Olympians; taking classes from low tier junior colleges; taking GED classes; charting the stock market; reading; writing essays, books or screenplays; doing yoga or hobby crafts; attending various religious services; playing musical instruments including band rehearsal—with the occasional concert on the recreation yard; attending after dinner Adult Continuing Education symposiums created, organized and hosted by fellow club members; calling and emailing family; feeding peanuts to squirrels or cookies to a family of racoons (the are so cute); or some other activity with the strong aroma of leisure blase.

Over at the adjoining camp much of the same occurs but without any security barriers. Reader, please try hard not to laugh, but at the camp campers operate a dairy farm. Yes, they milk cows! They also traverse throughout the base and Lompoc community performing trivial, look busy, tasks. You can be certain, nobody is straining, much less training, to help fight wildfires.

You might think with each member's sojourn costing taxpayers, on average, close to \$42,000 annually members should be availed to train and help in a time of crisis—say, for example, fight wildfires. No, club members and campers are currently prohibited from helping. But take a look at CDC's inmates and you see they are allowed to help. What's wrong with this picture?

Home insurers charge thousands of dollars in annual premiums to provide private firefighting services, mostly to the well-to-do. Federal inmate firefighters can be there to help the not so well-to-do. And insurers pass along their wildfire financial pain to policy holders and cut dividends. Let's not forget the several devastating wildfires California PG&E ignited in 2018. Everybody would surely have embraced help from federal inmate firefighters.

Annually, California requests billions in federal aid to help recover from wildfires. Accompanying this aid should be additional firefighters drawn from a volunteering population of federal inmates warehoused at low and minimum facilities, just like at CDC.

Establishing a federal inmate firefighting program on Vandenberg Air Force Base isn't rocket science. And just like CDC's successful inmate firefighting program, each federal inmate

firefighter would be working, training, fighting wildfires or clearing forest combustibles and thereby earn a day-for-a-day good time credit sentence reduction, another bona fide win-win-win. And a backslapping coda: actual rehabilitation, for those actually requiring it, instead of the Bureau's scripted and patented paper compliance—symbolism over substance—inmate programming ruse marketed to America under the brand name "Rehabilitation."

Rest assured, like yesterday, today and tomorrow federal inmates at low and minimum facilities will be praying for wildfire victims as the fires rage. They'll be praying and relaxing and watching the news coverage and wishing they could help. And they know they're needed because, after all, who doesn't want more firefighters fighting wildfires? But until then, tennis anyone?

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is the author's pen name. He
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